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The lessons of nature

In ancient times one of Adam's two sons killed the other. Now the murderer was faced with the problem of what to do with his brother's dead body. It was not until he saw a crow dig a hole in the ground to bury the carcass of another crow that he realized what he must do. Nature had taught him the way.

Thus, at the very beginning of human history, God communicated to man the necessity to interpret His signs in the world around him. Everywhere there were lessons to be learned from nature.

One of the most important lessons that we can learn is from the habits of migratory birds:

Most birds are gregarious during migration, even those that display a fierce individualism at all other times, such as many birds of prey and insectivorous passerines. Birds with similar habits sometimes travel together, a phenomenon observed among various species of shore-birds. Flocks sometimes show a remarkable cohesion, the most characteristic migratory formation of geese, ducks, pelicans, and cranes in a 'V' with the point turned in the direction of flights (*Encyclopaedia, Britannica*, 12/181).

'Unity in diversity' an aphorism which should be known and appreciated by all mankind, is a matter of sheer instinct with other living creatures. Man, to his great discredit, appears to be the only creature in this world who has not been able to learn this great universal reality from the lessons of nature.

Religion and reason

Advanced study has shown that there is more to life than meets the eye; all the great realities of life lie beyond our comprehension.

In ancient times, water was just water. Then with the 19th century came the invention of the microscope. When water was placed under it, the startling discovery was made that it contained countless live bacteria. Similarly, the stars that could be seen with the naked eye were supposed to be all the heavenly bodies that existed. Now the skies have been scanned with powerful telescopes and information has been sent back from space probes, with the result that the true immensity of the universe is at last being understood.

These two examples show the difference in thinking in ancient and modern times which has been brought about by modern technology. Other types of research in different fields have shown with certainty that there are many more realities than had ever been imagined by man when he was limited to the sphere of simple, unaided observation. But these new discoveries so excited the discoverers that they felt justified in claiming that reality was definable as that which could be directly observed, and that what we could not experience or observe was mere hypothesis and did not, therefore, exist.

In the nineteenth century, this claim, made with great enthusiasm, was most damaging to religion. The fact that religious creeds are based on a belief in the unseen, that their truths are neither observable nor demonstrable led many people to the conclusion that religious dogma was hypothetical and, therefore, untrue.

Twentieth century research, however, has completely reversed this position, advanced study having shown that there is certainly more to life than meets the eye: in fact, all the great realities of life lie beyond our comprehension.

According to Bertrand Russell there are two forms of knowledge: knowledge of things and knowledge of truths. Only "things" can be directly observed: "truths" can only be understood by indirect observation. Or, in other words, inference. The existence of light, gravity, magnetism and nuclear energy in the universe is an undisputed fact, but man cannot directly observe these things. He knows them only by their effects. Man discovers certain "things," from which he infers the existence of "truths."

This change in the concept of knowledge which occurred in the twentieth century changed the whole situation so radically, that man was forced to accept the existence of things which he could not directly see, but only indirectly experience. With this intellectual revolution the difference between seen and unseen reality disappeared. Invisible objects became as important as visible objects. Man was compelled to accept that indirect, or inferential argument, was academically as sound as direct argument.

In our own times, divine reasoning has become truly scientific. For instance, the greatest argument for religion is what philosophers call the argument from design. Nineteenth century scholars, in their zeal, did not accept this reasoning. To them it was an inferential argument and not therefore, academically tenable. But in the present age, this objection has been invalidated. Nowadays man is compelled to infer the existence of a designer of the universe from the existence of a design in the universe, just as he accepts the theory of the flow of electrons from the movement of a wheel.

A statement made by Bertrand Russell throws some light on this matter. In the preface to his book, *Why I am not a Christian*, he writes:

I think all the great religions of the world - Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Communism - both untrue and harmful. It is evident as a matter of logic that, since they disagree, not more than one of them can be true. With very few exceptions, the religion which a man accepts is that of the community in which he lives, which makes it obvious that the influence of environment is what has led him to accept the religion in question. It is true that Scholastics invented what professed to be logical arguments proving the existence of God, and that these arguments, or others of a similar tenor, have been accepted by many eminent philosophers, but the logic to which these traditional arguments appealed is of an antiquated Aristotelian sort which is now rejected by practically all logicians except such as are Catholics. There is one argument that is not purely logical. I mean the argument from design.

This argument, however, was destroyed by Darwin; and, in any case, could only be made logically acceptable at the cost of abandoning God's omnipotence.

Arguing the existence of a designer from design is, as Russell admits, a scientific argument in itself. It is the very argument which science itself uses to prove anything. Russell then proceeds to reject this argument by citing Darwin's theory of evolution. This rejection would be acceptable only if Darwin's theory had itself been scientifically established. But scientific research has proved Darwinism to be mere hypothesis, rather than established scientific fact. It is Russell's first statement, therefore, concerning the validity of the argument from design, that must prevail. His rejection of that argument on the basis of Darwinism is groundless.

Human Potential

The reality of events suggests that human beings are amazingly controlled and resilient in the face of adversity. Perhaps heroism – not panic or shock – is the right word to describe their most common behavior in times of disaster.

In the Ohio State University of U.S.A. there is a department known as the Disaster Research Center. It was established in 1963, and so far studied over one hundred different calamities affecting human beings on a vast scale. It was discovered that at moments of crisis, an extraordinary new potential develops in people which saves them from succumbing to disasters and their aftermath. In 1961, for example, Texas was struck by a severe coastal tempest, but less than half of the inhabitants opted to vacate the area. Over 50 percent of them had the confidence to stay on in spite of the storm warnings issued to them four days in advance. Subsequently, in 1971, a big dam was weakened considerably following an earthquake, which seriously endangered the lives of 70,000 people, but at that very critical time only 7 per cent of the population chose to leave their hearths and homes.

Such research has also revealed that the victims of such disasters, still maintain high hopes for the future. The citizens of the two affected areas of Texas, having witnessed the destruction caused by horrible floods, were interviewed about what they felt were their future prospects. Surprisingly less than ten per cent expressed apprehension and misgivings. The rest of them, irrespective of the large-scale destruction, were hopeful about their future. The above-mentioned institute sums up the report of the research it has conducted on disasters in the following words: "In conclusion, the reality of events suggests that human beings are amazingly controlled and resilient in the face of adversity. Perhaps heroism-not panic or shock – is the right word to describe their most common behavior in times of disaster.

The Creator has endowed his creature – man – with extraordinary capabilities, one of which is his capacity to plan his life anew with tremendous vigor, even when threatened with total annihilation. Man can do more than compensate for his losses. The discovery of this natural, hidden potential in man, serves to teach a great lesson, that is, that no individual, whether singly or as part of a group, who suffers trials and tribulations should ever waste a moment's time in lamenting and grieving over his losses. Instead, he should press God-given capabilities into service to reconstruct his life. It is quite possible that the very circumstances in which he seemed to be heading towards complete annihilation, could serve to unfold a new and brighter phase of his existence.

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An able and righteous man the most treasured asset

Zayd ibn Aslam reports, on the authority of his father, that Umer ibn Khattab asked some of his companions to tell him about their ambitions. "I would like to have this house full of money, so that I could spend it, in the path of God," volunteered one. Another said that he would like gold – yet another mentioned pearls-so that their wealth could be spent in the furtherance of God's cause. "What I would like more than anything," said Umer, "would be to have this house full of men like Abu Ubaidah ibn al Jarrah, Muadh ibn Jabal and Hudhaifah ibn al-Yaman, so that I could use them for God' work."

(Al-Tarikh al-Saghir)

Patience, perseverance and compassion

“Success is a matter of cool decisions, without constant wavering and changing of the mind, acute observation, initiative, and unremitting attention to a vast number of petty details. ”

The above statement would appear to be a sure-fire recipe for material success in a very large number of situations. As it happens, it is a formula evolved from the experience of Campbell Rogers, an expert in poultry keeping of international repute. But this unswerving devotion to taxing minutiae is not all that he advocates. He begins his now famous book, *Profitable Poultry-Keeping in India and the East* (D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., Bombay, 1959) with the notion that success in large-scale poultry-farming is largely dependent upon one's temperament. He feels that one who does not love birds and animals can never build himself up in this profession. So that quite apart from patience, diligence, the ability to do without holidays and a keen eye for profit, one must also remain, kind, humane, and filled with compassion for living creatures.

With this dimension added to the overall picture, it would be reasonable to say that he gives us a valuable formula, not only for material success, but for useful, harmonious social living. Just as the successful poultry-man must give his attention to the habits and requirements of his birds, so also must the social being take into account the inclinations and compulsions of others and show his willingness to make concessions to them in the interests of maintaining the happiness and tranquility of society. Success in life is not just a matter of keeping one's nose to the grindstone and taking correct decisions about financial matters, but of understanding one's fellow-men and according to them the kindness and respect which one would wish to have oneself.

No wrong answers in the Hereafter

A one million rand (about Rs. 60 lakhs) prize was bagged at a recent TV quiz show, 'Operation Hunger Goldrush' in Johannesburg by a John Smeddle, although he gave the wrong answer to the final question.

To beat the rest of the 20 competitors and win the first prize, Smeddle, representing a family team of five, needed the right answer to the last question. Asked to name three of Henry VIII's six wives, Smeddle and his partner, Kingswood college Headmaster Neil Jardine came up with the answers 'Anne Boleyn' and 'Catherine of Aragon'-both correct. But the third name eluded them and, as the precious seconds ticked away, Smeddle turned to Jardine for help, with only a few seconds left. Jardine answered, 'Jane Grey,' which the judges promptly accepted as correct. Now, Jane Grey, the granddaughter of Henry VIII's younger sister, was never married to the English monarch. It was actually Jane Seymour who was his wife. Perhaps because of the similarity of the names, or because of emotionally charged atmosphere the judges erred in accepting 'Jane Grey' as the correct answer. In any case, the prize money was handed over to the team represented by John Smeddle.

So it would appear to be possible in this life to bag the first prize with a wrong answer. But in the life hereafter, no such success will be possible. In that world it is only one who gives all the correct answers who will win the first prize. Those who give wrong answers can expect eternal failure in the ideal world of the Hereafter.

The Hereafter

Those huge masses of ice, which we know as icebergs, found floating in the seas of the North and South poles, number amongst the most deceptive and, therefore, most dangerous phenomena to be found in nature. Their deceptiveness lies in the fact that no matter how huge, or wonderful in configuration, what we see of them amounts to only one tenth of their enormous bulk. What lies below the surface of the ocean, spreading far and beyond the visible parameter, poses tremendous hazards to the unwary. In some ways, our lives are like those floating mountains of ice. The part we spend in this world – about a hundred years, or less – is like the part of the iceberg which is visible above the surface. We can see it, touch it, feel it. We can take its measure and deal with it effectively. But the part which comes after death is like the submerged part – vast, unfathomable and fraught with peril. It is something which defies the imagination, but which we must nevertheless try to comprehend, for that is the part of human life which God has decreed should be eternal and, as such, ineluctable.

We are all familiar with the facts of our origin and the course which life takes from the womb until death. But at the end of our lifespan, whether it terminates in youth or in old age, our familiarity with the nature of things comes to an end. It has been surmised that death means total and final annihilation. But this is not so. Death is simply a means of consigning us to a new womb, to the womb of the universe itself. From that point, we are ushered into another world: the Hereafter. While the present, physical world as we know it has a finite time-frame, the Hereafter stretches away from us into infinity. We fondly imagine that there is some parallel between the pleasures and pains of this world and those of the next, but, in truth, nothing that we can experience in this world will ever match the extremes of agony and bliss of life after death. Those who merit punishment in the Hereafter will be condemned to suffer the most horrific pain for all time to come. But those who merit God's blessings in the Hereafter shall know the most wonderful joy and contentment.

It is because life in this world is intended to be a testing – ground that the world of the Hereafter remains beyond our reach. But all around us, we have innumerable signs, which can help us, by analogy, to understand and appreciate the nature of the world to come. Imagine a room, which ostensibly consists of four walls, furniture, a few material objects and some human occupants. To all outward appearances, that is what the room adds up to. But the moment we switch on the TV set, we are introduced to a hitherto unsuspected world of color, movement, and highly vocal human activity. This world, with its scenery and very alive human beings had existed all along. It had only needed the flip of a switch to make us aware of it. Similarly, our terrestrial existence is made up of a world within a world. The world we know is concrete, visible, audible, tangible. The 'other' world, the world within it, or

rather, beyond it, is not however, one which can be apprehended through any of the normal human senses; no switch can be turned on to make us understand what it is really like. Only death can do this for us. And when we reopen our eyes after death we find that what had formerly been impalpable, and quite beyond human comprehension is now a stark, overwhelming reality. It is then that we grasp what had hitherto existed, but remained invisible.

Once we have become clear in our minds that the afterlife truly exists, we realize that the sole aim of our earthly existence should be to strive for success in the life to come, for, unlike the present ephemeral world, the Hereafter is eternal and real. What we understand by suffering and solace in this world cannot be compared with the suffering and solace of the Hereafter.

Many individuals lead immoral, even criminal existences because they feel that we are free to do as we please in this world. Freedom we do have, but it exists only so that God may distinguish between the good and the evil, and determine who deserves a place of honour and dignity in the Hereafter and who should be condemned to eternal disgrace. While there is nothing to prevent the good and the evil from living cheek by jowl in this world, they will be separated in the Hereafter like the wheat from the chaff and will be judged according to their record in this life. Some will be condemned to an eternal Hell of pain and distress, while others will be blessed with eternal bliss and pleasure. Each will get his deserts.

Now let us look at the Hereafter from another point of view. I once had occasion to visit a senior official, and as we sat on the lawns of his palatial bungalow, he suddenly exclaimed, "Maulana Sahib, you don't know how bad our life is! Tomorrow I have to be at the airport before sunrise to welcome a foreign dignitary, and not only shall I have to deprive myself of sleep, but I shall have to welcome him with smiles – and that in spite of the fact that he is somebody I despise!" This simple anecdote shows there are two sides to the lives of those in high office. On the one hand, they enjoy power and prestige and the many perquisites that go with them, while, on the other hand, there is a side to their lives which is far from being enviable. If you look deep into some of these 'great' men, you will discover that they achieve their high positions because they persuade themselves to be content with triviality. If, outwardly, they lead glamorous existences, it is because, privately, they stoop to hypocrisy, sycophancy, opportunism and unscrupulousness. This double life is the price they pay to bolster their own self-interest. In this respect, many are simply following the trends of the time. Every 'great' man has two sides to his life - one all brilliance and glitter, the other all dark and soulless. The power and glamour which he achieves in his life has something animal-like about it when he agrees to kill what is human in himself.

Just as there are two sides to every life in this world, there are two aspects of every act in relation to this world and the Hereafter. One aspect of each act is our acceptance of it as what it is seen to be in this world. The other aspect is what results from this act in terms of the Hereafter. Imam Ahmad narrates that the Caliph Umar once said: 'No drink of milk or honey is better than swallowing one's anger.' In actuality, to swallow, or overcome one's anger is an extremely bitter experience, but in the Hereafter the result of doing so is sweeter by far than milk and honey. Today we reap the worldly fruits of our actions!

Tomorrow, in the Hereafter, we shall have to face up the results of our deeds and misdeeds. Today, we can see only one aspect of our actions – that of immediate pleasure or gain – but the Day of Resurrection will place us in a position to see much more. Just as a person standing on top of wall can look down on both sides, so shall we be able to see both aspects of the truth. Not only shall we watch our entire history unreel before us like a film, but we shall witness the consequences of our own worldly actions. ‘Then,’ as the Qur’an says, ‘shall each soul know what it

has sent forward (to the Hereafter) and what it has kept back (in the world behind)’ (82:5). Whatever was done for worldly reasons will be left behind, unconsidered. Only those actions which were carried out with the Hereafter in mind will benefit us in the life to come.

Two men once brought a case before the Prophet for judgment. One had misappropriated the other’s land, but because of certain legal quirks, it was difficult to pass a verdict against him. After due consideration, the Prophet warned him: If the court gives a verdict in your favour, think of it as being fire and brimstone which you have been awarded’. The piece of land might, in terms of this world, have been a prized possession, but in the perspective of the Hereafter it would assume the terrible properties of fire and brimstone. The Prophet said – with justice – ‘Summer heat is a small part of the heat of Hell!’

These two sides of human deeds have been beautifully described through allegories and symbols in the Hadith of the Miraj (The Prophet’s journey to the Heavens) when the Prophet reached Sidrah al Muntaha (the lote tree at the end of the Seventh Heaven), ‘he saw four rivers: two flowing inward and two flowing outward. It was explained to him by the Angel Gabriel that the two inward-flowing were rivers of Paradise and the outward-flowing were the Nile and the Euphrates.

By analogy, the present world and the Hereafter are two sides of the same event. The worldly side is trivial and temporary, while the Hereafter side is substantive and permanent. It is to the latter side that we must face up after death. Here due has complete freedom to live out one’s worldly existence as one wills; in the life-to-come, one will have no choice about the future course of one’s life. One will either be raised to eternal glory, or cast down into the pit of everlasting Hell.

Keeping Satan at bay

There is a Hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad relates a conversation between Satan and one of the prophets of old. This tradition is of some length, but we reproduce here its most salient point:

When Satan asked the Prophet where he would seek refuge from his onslaughts, the latter replied that when he felt the slightest influence of Satan, he would seek refuge in God. God's enemy said, "You have spoken the truth, that is the way to save yourself from me." "Tell me," said the Prophet, "how is it that you are able to overpower the son of Adam?" Satan replied, "I seize him when he is angry, or in the grip of carnal desire."

How vulnerable is man to the attacks of Satan when he falls a prey to fits of fury or overwhelming desires. It is then that Satan exploits man's weakness to turn his footsteps away from the path which would lead him straight to Paradise and to set his foot on the downward slope to the raging inferno of Hell. Once on this slippery descent, it is well-nigh impossible for a man to retrace his footsteps.

Man should be ever wary of his own baser instincts, for, if they exist, it is at the instigation of the devil. Every strong craving, every fit of anger is a dangerous pitfall set there in front of man by Satan. The only way to avoid such perils is to turn to the Almighty, and seek His help in all sincerity. Then the devil is sure to be balked of his prey; it is God and God alone who can snatch man from the clutches of Satan.

To make up for helplessness

God's power is absolute; man's power before His is as nothing. It is not true to say that the difference between God and man is one of having more power or less power; rather the difference is one of power and powerlessness. God is omnipotent, while man has not one iota of power.

What if one questions the very propriety of God having created man as a powerless creature? What if one claims that it was not fair of God to have put man in a world in which he has no power over himself, or over the world around him? This question can only be answered if a way is found in which man can completely make up for his helplessness. Nothing less than complete compensation for man's helplessness must come from his helplessness itself. It must be the very fact that man has no power that makes up for his powerlessness, for otherwise the answer will not fit the question.

The answer to this question is given clearly in the teachings of the Qur'an and Prophet of Islam. God has shown us special mercy: He has made asking sufficient to ensure that we receive. If a person makes a real, earnest supplication to God, then he will find what he something will receive it. One who presents his helplessness before God in the form of humble supplication will receive compensation for his helplessness. In this way God gives unto man from his own presence.

The Prophet of Islam put it this way: 'No prayer is ever rejected.' These words of the Prophet Jesus express the same truth:

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; Knock, and it shall be opened unto you:

For everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that sleekest findeth;

And to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?

Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent?

If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him.

(St. Mathew 7:7-11)

Participating in spirit

In the year 9AH, the Prophet led an expedition to Tabuk. Some Muslims had valid excuses precluding their participation in this expedition. With regard to them, this verse of the Qur'an was revealed:

It shall be no offence for the disabled, the sick, and those lacking the means to spend, to stay behind, if they are true to Allah and His Apostle. The righteous shall not be blamed: Allah is Forgiving. Merciful. Nor shall those be blamed who, when they came to you demanding conveyances (to the battlefield) and you said: 'I can find none to carry you,' went away in tears grieving that they could not find the means to spend (9:91-92).

According to the Prophet's seventh century biographer, Ibn Ishaq, these were seven individuals belonging to the Ansar. After the Prophet had set out on the expedition, the Prophet referred to them in the presence of his companions. 'Do you know,' he said to them, 'you have left some people behind in Medina who will share with you the reward of everything you have spent, every valley you have crossed and every victory you have gained over the enemy.' 'Even though they remain in Medina?' Asked the companions. 'Yes," replied the Prophet. 'They had valid excuses for staying behind.'

This goes to show that a person, without doing anything, can gain a share in the reward of those who have. While appearing to have achieved nothing, he can join the ranks of those who have achieved much. How can this be? The way to accomplish this is for us to participate in spirit in those actions in which we are unable to take an active, physical part. For example, if we behold another person greater than ourselves, rather than being jealous of him, we should acknowledge his superiority; that way we shall have a share in the reward for anything that he does, which it is beyond us to accomplish. If someone is wealthier than ourselves it should be our heart's wish that God grant him the grace to be truly thankful for his wealth, and spend it rightly; then, when he does so, we shall have a share in his reward. And if we see someone in an influential position, while we remain among the anonymous masses, we can pray for him: 'Lord, may he use his influence in service of truth, not in service of falsehood'; thus we may gain a share of his reward.

Those who show mercy will be dealt with mercifully

“The Merciful One shows mercy to the merciful,” said the Prophet. “Be merciful with those on earth. The One in Heaven will be merciful with you.”

(Ahmad. Abu Da’ud, Al-Tirmidhi)

All for the sake of 31 days

The January 1983 elections in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh brought the Telugu Desam party, under leadership of N.T. Rama Rao, into power. On August 16, 1984, however, N. T. Rama Rao's government was dismissed by the then governor, Mr. Ram Lal, and a Telugu Desam dissident, N.T. Bhaskara Rao, invited to form a government in alliance with the Congress party. Mr. Bhaskara Rao was given 30 days to prove his majority in the 293 member state assembly.

Mr. Bhaskara Rao's group then made a concerted effort to win over MLA's. According to the Hindustan Times (September 13, 1984), a price of 2 million rupees was placed on the head of each MLA. What N. T. Rama Rao did to foil him was to confine members loyal to him in his own Ramakrishna Studios. When Mr. Bhaskara Rao proved unable to prove his majority on the floor of the house within 30 days, his government became unconstitutional and was dismissed by the new state governor Mr. S.D. Sharma. On September 16, 1984, Mr. Sharma invited N.T. Rama Rao to form a government once again.

On September 19, 1984, The Times of India published a special report on events in Andhra Pradesh, highlighting the misdemeanours of N. T. Bhaskara Rao during his short term of office. The month-long chief minister had released a state government fund of 100 crore (10000 million) rupees, and had started openly inviting members of the state assembly to 'defect and be a minister.' The writer continues:

During his 31-day, uncertain career as chief minister, Mr. Bhaskara Rao behaved and acted as if he had come to stay for a hundred years.

This is an apt description of the way everyone acts in this world. One is only in the world for a short period; it might only be for a 31 day spell. Yet people act as if they have come to the world to stay. How extraordinary it is that man should come into the world and live here as if he were never going to leave; yet departure from this world is inevitable, and comes sooner than he plans.

Aiming directly at the target

The American writer, Charles Garfield, who has made a thorough, psychological study of peak-achievement, says that 'in a study of 90 leaders in business, politics, sports and arts, many spoke of 'false starts' but never of 'failure.' Disappointment spurs greater resolve, growth or change. Moreover, no matter how rough things get, super-achievers always feel there are other avenues they can explore. They always have another idea to test.' (*Reader's Digest*, October 1986).

The writer emphasizes the fact, however, that these high achievers are neither superhuman, charismatic nor even singularly talented, what they do have in common is an 'uncanny knack for increasing the odds in their favour through simple techniques that almost anyone can cultivate.' He delineates five major areas of concern. First and foremost, one must have a great sense of mission, and a strong desire to turn everything that comes one's way to good account. Secondly, one must be result-oriented, so that one is not just preoccupied with unceasing activities, but with a definite outcome of one's efforts. Thirdly, one has to take stock of whatever knowledge and skills one has and bring out whatever is latent and waiting to be used, so that it can be tuned up to a peak of perfection. Very often, it is not so much a question of adding to one's knowledge and skills as of developing what is already there – capacities of which we are sometimes barely aware. Frequently it is one's initial sense of mission which taps these inner resources.

Sometimes it is impossible to achieve distant goals without the aid of one's fellow-men, in which case one has to develop the capacity to inspire the team spirit in others. Particularly in highly competitive situations, it is essential to be able to encourage other competent people to make a significant contribution to one's own performance.

But no one sails through life without bumping into obstacles and suffering a variety of setbacks. This is when one must beware of lapsing into passivity, when one has to take oneself firmly in hand and decide to look upon such things not as great gulfs from which one will never emerge, but simply as hurdles which have to be surmounted if one is to finish the race. One's initial feeling of disappointment should quickly transform itself into a greater determination to try harder, to alter one's approach, to seek different and better ways of achieving one's goal, and to channel one's energies more effectively towards their ultimate target.

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Remaining steadfast in the face of persecution

During the Abbasid Caliphate the emergence of the Mutazilite creed¹ stirred up controversy among Muslims, as a result of which Imam Ahmad ibn Hambal had severe punishments inflicted upon him. Yet he refused to alter the position he had adopted. Hafiz ibn Hajar tells us that he was beaten so severely as to make “even an elephant flee.”

Police violence: An objective approach

Communal violence is one of the most talked of subject these days, and discussions thereon are dominated by the fact that the brunt of police violence has to be borne by the Muslims. 'The police are killers,' says Muslims. Their theme song is that the brutalities of Adolf Hitler and Chengiz Khan pale into insignificance beside what the police inflict on innocent citizens.

At face value, this would appear to be correct. But we must pause and give greater thought to the actual reasons for police 'mis-conduct'. Why should it take place at all? If we marshall all of the facts, we see that in every case, the situation has been aggravated more by the Muslims in question being easily provoked than by a desire on the part of police to be aggressive. And it is noteworthy that wherever Muslims are to be found living together in any concentration, this over-sensitiveness is very much in evidence; sooner or later, it is the Muslims themselves who have to pay dearly for it at every level.

Instances of present-day Muslims fighting amongst themselves are not uncommon. Due to some historical reasons they are easily insulted and then they become over-emotional. However, when it is a case of Muslim fighting Muslim, the quarrel is at least confined to the individuals concerned and does not, therefore, go beyond all normal civilized limits. But when the fight is between a Muslim and a Hindu, no matter how minor the provocation it very soon takes on a communal hue, and the price has to be paid by the whole community.

The worst kind of situation which develops in this way culminates in a confrontation with the police, or in U.P., with the PAC – The Provincial Armed Constabulary. No one seems to take into account the fact that if you pelt armed policemen with stones, they will retaliate with bullets. Why should they not make use of their superior weapons? While fighting with stray individuals is like playing with matches, fighting with the police is like playing with bombs. Why should we expect that the result will be anything other than general carnage?

One glaring example of this is the incident, which took place in the Idgah at Moradabad on the 13th August 1980. It was a case of pigs having been found within the precincts of the Idgah, at which the Muslims became highly enraged. The police officer on duty pleaded with the Muslims to remain calm and assured them that they would deal with the situation and that the culprits would be punished. But the Muslims were too incensed to listen to what the police had to say, and began pelting them with stones. The police officer himself was hit, and fell down seriously injured. Now it was the turn of the police to be provoked, and, of course, they did not discard their rifles in favour of stones. Ultimately it

was the Muslims who suffered the most disastrous of consequences. And all because of their own ungovernable tempers.

It is clearly the Muslims who are the losers, whether at the individual or at the communal level, yet they do not stop to think of the ferocity with which reprisals will be carried out when they themselves have given into provocation, lashing out at all and sundry. They think it is like aiming a blow at a domestic animal which, if it reacts at all, will do so mildly and without rancour. They do not stop to consider that when they lash out in a frenzy of emotionalism it is a savage wild beast with which they have to deal – an untamed monster, which will fight back with tooth and claw. The culminating point of their endeavour will be the inevitable backlash of police brutality.

Events having shown that Muslims clash not only with Hindus, but also with the police – they themselves paying the most devastating price for having allowed their sense of provocation to get out of hand – we should now ascertain where to lay the blame. Clearly, the greatest offenders are the journalists and leaders of the Muslim community itself. After each and every riot they cannot find words enough to describe the ‘brutality and savagery’ of the police; in consequence, Muslim sentiments are kept perpetually on the boil. Their anger against and hatred for the police are never allowed to simmer down. As a result, whenever the police appear on the scene, they become enraged and hit out at them, trying by all possible means to humiliate them. This belligerent attitude on the part of Muslim newspapers and leaders is the root cause of the intense mutual hatred between Muslims and police.

The sole solution to the problem is to be found in the Qur’an, which bids us return good for evil: ‘Good and evil deeds are not alike. Requite evil with good, and he, between whom and you there is enmity, will become your dearest friend’ (41:34).

The result of acting out of goodness is that it has a softening effect on the enemy – to the point where he becomes a friend. Even the PAC would not be immune to such social palliatives. They are, after all, just human beings like everyone else, and would surely be open to an amicable and reasonable approach.

The Qur'an for non-Muslims

At the beginning of his article, 'The Qur'an for Non-Muslims' (*Express Magazine*, May 17) Mr. Khushwant Singh has stated that 'some' of its prose is as powerful as that of the Old Testament.' Had the writer made his month-long study of the Qur'an in Arabic, and not through different English translation, he would have appreciated not just 'some' of its passages, but its entire text as a superb piece of literature.

He states that he failed to find anything in the Qur'an to the effect that the consumption of alcohol was haram (forbidden). To bear this out he has quoted extensively from passages which deal, not with the wine of this present world, but with the wine of Paradise, which will not 'dull their senses' or 'take away their reason.' Having certainly confused his readers with this, he omits any mention of the 90th sura of the fifth chapter – 'Believers, wine and games of chance – are abominations devised by the devil. Avoid them so that you may prosper,' – which surely makes it quite explicit that drinking is forbidden.

It is true that the word *haram* does not occur regarding wine in the Qur'an, but the confusion arises out of a misunderstanding of the Qur'anic terminology. The words in the verse (5:90), according to Qur'anic usage indicated forbidden things and quite adequately demonstrate that drinking comes into this category. So that there should be no doubt whatsoever on this subject, the Hadith, which is an authentic interpretation of the Qur'an, has specifically applied the word haram to wine.

He later alludes to Muslims' 'single-minded devotion to a single book' (i.e. the Qur'an) in such a way as to suggest a mindless narrowness of purpose on the part of Muslims, supposedly resulting from their reading of the Qur'an. In this connection he relates the story of the burning, by Muslim conquerors, of the great library at Alexandria. Although he dubs this story 'apocryphal', he quotes in support of it what the reader is supposed to recognize as an Islamic sentiment: 'If these other books agree with our Qur'an, they are superfluous and should be destroyed. And if they disagree with it, they are wrong and deserve to be destroyed.'

If this had truly been the Muslims attitude, would they, in their heyday, been at such pains to translate books from all over the world into Arabic? Such an attitude could certainly never have existed, for the Qur'an on the contrary, has always encouraged a broadening of the intellect through the spirit of scientific enquiry.

As for the destruction of the great library at Alexandria, this was actually the work of the Romans, about three centuries before Caliph Umar came to govern the country. It was a Christian by the name of Abul

Farah Malti, who later falsely attributed this act to the Muslims so that Christians should not be accused of wanton vandalism. The Encyclopedia Britannica (1984) makes it adequately clear that the library at Alexandria 'continued to exist under Roman rule until the third century A. D.'

Modern historians have gone into considerable detail to confirm these facts. Philip K. Hitti states the case admirably in his *History of the Arabs*:

The story that by the Caliph's order Amr for six long months fed the numerous bath furnaces of the city with the volumes of Alexandrian library is one of those tales that make good fiction but bad history. The great Ptolemaic Library was burnt as early as 48 B.C. by Julius Caesar. A later one, referred to as the Daughter Library, was destroyed about A.D. 389 as a result of an edict by the Emperor Theodosius. At the time of the Arab conquest, therefore, no library of importance existed in Alexandria and no contemporary writer ever brought the charge against 'Amr or 'Umar' (p. 166).

The truth is so well-substantiated that this hardly needs further comment.

What if people won't pay up?

A certain group of young people all belonging to Phulwari Sharif (Patna) once planned to hold a *Seera* meeting in commemoration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. Theirs being a historic town, they felt that their meeting should be of the same nature, and when asked by the editor of a local journal how much they intended to spend on it, they said they were raising a fund of Rs. 5,000 for this purpose. The editor's response to this was that, of course, they were proud to belong to the Ummah of the Prophet Muhammad, their love for him being the most precious of all their assets. "But tell me," he said, "is this the best way to spread his good example? Just think, there is not one single decent library in the whole of Phulwari Sharif. With this much money, you could lay the foundations of a good library, containing all the best books on *Seera*, and this could also include a center for adult education. Whereas the fine sentiments voiced at your meeting will disappear in the wind, the books in the library would continue to benefit people for many years to come." The young people agreed in principle with what the editor had to say, but they were not willing to alter their plans. And their reason? "People will not contribute to such a library, whereas it is easy to raise contributions for a meeting commemorating the Prophet's birth." (*Naqeeb*, Patna, January 16, 1978)

It is a fact that there are things to which people will gladly contribute, and things to which they will not – irrespective of the worthiness of the cause. All too frequently, objectives which do not elicit popular support have to be abandoned in favour of less worthy causes which, for no apparent reason, fire the imagination of the public at large.

The Phulwari Sharif incident is indicative of the underlying cause of the present-day decline in Muslim affairs. It being obvious that the general public are u'discriminating in the causes to which they subscribe, those who come forward to work for and amongst Muslims veer sometimes quite unwittingly, towards those areas of operation where contributions are easy to come by. These are the activities which put a person straight into the public spotlight, attracting wide popular support and making a leader's name. There is only one way to change this general attitude, and that is for leaders of the general public to change their attitude, by expending their energies in those activities to which people do not contribute. Undoubtedly, this requires a sacrifice on the part of one generation. But only if they are willing to make this sacrifice will future generations be able to taste the fruits.

Getting the image we deserve

When Cat Stevens, the well-known English pop-singer, was studying Islam, he was told, 'By all means study Islam but do not, for the sake of God, study Muslims.' He does not, however, seem to have been deterred by this paradoxical and clearly discouraging statement for he finally embraced Islam in 1977 in a London Mosque, taking the name of Yusuf Islam.

His views on this paradox were brought out in an interview which was published in the May-June 1980 issue of the London monthly Muslim. Asked what he thought would be a solution to the constant tirade of propaganda against Islam in the English press, he replied 'People are not such simpletons that they would believe everything that is published in the newspapers. People do form their own opinions. However, if they found Muslims indulging in such evils as are mentioned, then it is quite possible that they would give credence to newspaper reports.'

Facts are facts, but newspaper reporting does not necessarily do them justice. It is, therefore, upto Muslims to demonstrate that their way of life belies the image projected by the media. No intelligent reader will then give any serious attention to what are clearly distortions of the truth. If, for instance, it were reported in the newspapers that the illiteracy rate is highest among Christians, that beggars are greatest in number among Parsis and that the Sikh nation is the most timid, readers would simply dismiss these statements as the crassest idiocy for they are so obviously contrary to known facts.

If Muslims' conduct is good, deprecating remarks about Islam will fall on stony ground. When people find from their own experience that Muslims deal justly with others, refusing to be provoked at every turn, that they honour the life and property of other human beings and that, above all, they are great seekers after the truth, they will attach no importance to adverse statements in the press. They will consider such reports baseless and will not even read beyond the heading.

Setting disagreement aside

“As long as they do good, do good alongwith them, but if they do evil, then you should refrain from doing evil along with them.” – Caliph Uthman.

When ‘Uthman, the third of the rightly-guided Caliphs, was nearing the end of his life, he found himself besieged in his house in Medina by a thousand-strong horde from Egypt who had descended upon Medina in a great state of wrath because of some false rumours they had heard about him. Despite their accusations being utterly without foundation they refused to allow him to leave his house, and they cut off his water supply. The siege lasted forty days, then finally, on the 18th of month of Dhil-Hijjah, 35, AH, after raising a great hue and cry, they attacked ‘Uthman and killed him. He was then 82 years of age.

During the period of siege, because he was surrounded on all sides by rioters, he was unable to visit the Prophet’s mosque for prayers. As Caliph, it was ‘Uthman’s duty to lead the Muslims in prayer. When he was prevented from doing so, the leader of the insurrectionists, Ghafiqy ibn Harb, took over the duties of the Imam.

This placed the Muslims of Medina in a serious dilemma. On the one hand, they considered themselves duty bound to attend prayers at the mosque, while, on the other hand, they could not overlook the fact that the person leading the prayers was himself a blatant mischief-maker and wrongdoer. During these critical days, one of them managed to meet ‘Uthman and asked him what it was proper to do under such circumstances. The Caliph told him that they should follow the lead of this man in offering their prayers. “As long as they do good, do good alongwith them, but if they do evil, then you should refrain from doing evil along with them.”

In giving such a reply, the Caliph set us a wonderful example of how we should always keep our sense of justice while passing judgment on anyone-no matter how strong the grudges we may bear against him. Our disagreements with him should be limited to the actual subject of disagreement and should not be allowed to influence either our thinking on other matters of mutual concern, or our general opinion of the offender. The fact that we are at odds with him should not make us deviate one whit from the path of justice in our dealings with him. This is not an easy attitude to adopt, but it is one to which, out of fairness, we should give much serious thought.